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ABSTRACT

Delinquency reduction and reduction of the number of juveniles referred to the justice system were assessed for 14 diversion programs in Los Angeles County. A project versus nonproject comparison and a pre-post analysis with archival and other data gathered from 1972 through 1977 were used. Preliminary results indicated that the diversion projects may be effective in achieving the objective. Arrest rates were found to be lower after diversion onset for the project areas, but not for the nonproject regions. (Author)

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The Impact of Juvenile Diversion: An Assessment Using Multiple Archival Perspectives

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(Presented at WPA, San Diego, April 6, 1979)

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In my talk today, I will first give a brief overview of the concept of juvenile diversion and its history as a formal treatment program. Then I will highlight some results of evaluations done in conjunction with the diversion projects in Los Angeles County. Finally, I will discuss in detail the evaluation project that I have been working on. This is an assessment of the impact of the 14 federally funded diversion projects in Los Angeles County.

First, looking at the concept itself, the basic purpose of juvenile diversion is to create an alternative to the formal justice system in handling young offenders. Although diversion is primarily aimed at delinquents referred by law enforcement agencies, it also deals with juveniles considered pre-delinquent, such as children with personal or behavioral problems. Diversion typically involves referral of the juvenile to local community services; these services may include counseling, employment, recreation, and tutoring.

The idea behind diversion is not new--it is seen as a way to treat problem youth without formal processing and the possible associated stigma. And it has existed informally for quite some time. However, the federal government began taking an active part in diversion as a formal alternative to the justice system in the early 1970s, when it started to fund diversion programs as three-year demonstration projects. In Los Angeles County, 14 such federally funded projects have been established since 1974, and 13 of these are still in existence.

As a stipulation of funding, each project has been required to include some kind of evaluation of its effectiveness. Such evaluations have been

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conducted, although they vary widely in their methodological rigor and sophistication.

In summing up the evaluation results to date, it appears that some diversion projects may work, and it has been possible to identify at least a few reasons for their success. For example, some projects have noted decreased police contacts for juveniles who have been through the program, compared with those who have not. And it has been found that clients terminated from diversion services under positive circumstances had a much lower percentage of police contacts six months after referral than those who had negative terminations.

These evaluations, however, have generally been done on a project-by-project basis, with little attempt at integration. Thus, there have been 14 projects in the County with almost as many individual evaluations. The present study provides a coordinated evaluation of the 14 projects, on a countywide basis. It attempts to take evidence from a number of sources to establish the projects' effectiveness, first as a whole system, then individually, using the same criteria.

The design is basically a simple one. Two types of comparisons are being used. First, there is a project-non-project comparison. Although diversion projects exist in most areas of the County, there are at least 10 cities and additional large, unincorporated areas which are not participating in diversion programs. These are being used as a comparison group for the diversion areas. The second basis for comparison is a pre-post analysis. Data have been obtained from 1972 through 1977. Since the first projects began in early 1974 and the last in mid-1976, calculations have been made comparing data before and after each project's start.

The projects are being assessed using two criteria: whether they are reducing delinquency in their geographic areas and whether they are keeping

juveniles out of the justice system. Doing this has involved getting annual data from 1972 through 1977 on juvenile arrests and referrals to probation. Arrest figures have come from the Los Angeles Police Department, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and the Bureau of Criminal Statistics. Probation data come from law enforcement and the Probation Department. Similar figures have been obtained over the same period for the non-project areas. In an attempt to rule out rival explanations for any changes, consideration is being made of factors such as decreases or increases in the juvenile population. For this, public school enrollment figures are being used to estimate the number of juveniles in each region between the ages of 12 and 17.

That is basically the method employed. Now I will discuss some of the findings we have so far. I should first note here that the present paper deals only with the first objective mentioned earlier--that of reducing delinquency, as measured by decreasing arrest rates. Also, the findings given here pertain only to arrests made for violations of Section 602 of the Welfare & Institutions Code, which comprise offenses for which both adults and juveniles can be arrested, such as burglary and theft.

From the results of trend analyses done for periods both before and after each diversion project's inception, it appears that diversion <u>may</u> be effective in reducing delinquency. First, looking at overall County trends, the absolute figures show an increase in juvenile arrests from 1972 through 1974, going from about 71,000to 95,000 arrests. After this, however, the arrests showed a continual decrease, from 91,000 in 1975 to 83,000 in 1977. Remembering that the federally funded diversion projects began in 1974, the results are exactly in the direction one would expect. Arrest rates <u>should</u> show a decrease after 1974, if diversion is having an effect. And it is not unlikely that the impact would be evident at the County level, since the

diversion programs include most of the County's juvenile population.

With the expected decrease thus established, trend analyses were then performed on the arrest data. The period 1974-75 was used as a rough cutoff point, since most of the projects started during this time. Before doing the analyses, one adjustment was first made. To rule out the possibility that the decreasing juvenile population in Los Angeles County accounted for the arrest decreases, arrests were calculated per 10,000 juveniles. Using these adjusted figures, the analyses indicate that there was an average increase of 18% in arrest rates from 1972 through 1974, the pre-project period. But there was an average decrease of 3% in arrests in the period following the projects' start, from 1975 through 1977. Thus, the results at the County level are consistent with the notion of decreasing arrests with diversion onset, even after adjustments are made for the decreasing juvenile population.

After this countywide analysis, we took the analysis one step further--to a comparison of project areas with non-project areas. This was done to determine if regions with diversion projects showed decreased arrest rates while non-project areas did not, as one would expect. Looking at the figure on the handout, one can see that the results do indicate that--adjusted for the population, non-project areas showed an average increase of 25% in arrests from 1972 through 1974, then another small increase of 2% from 1975 through 1977. On the other hand, although the project areas also had an arrest increase during the pre-project period--of 17%, they had an average decrease of 4% during the three-year period after diversion's onset. Thus, while the trend for non-project cities and county areas was to slightly increasing arrests in the period after the diversion projects started, the project areas had a trend of decreasing arrests in the same period.

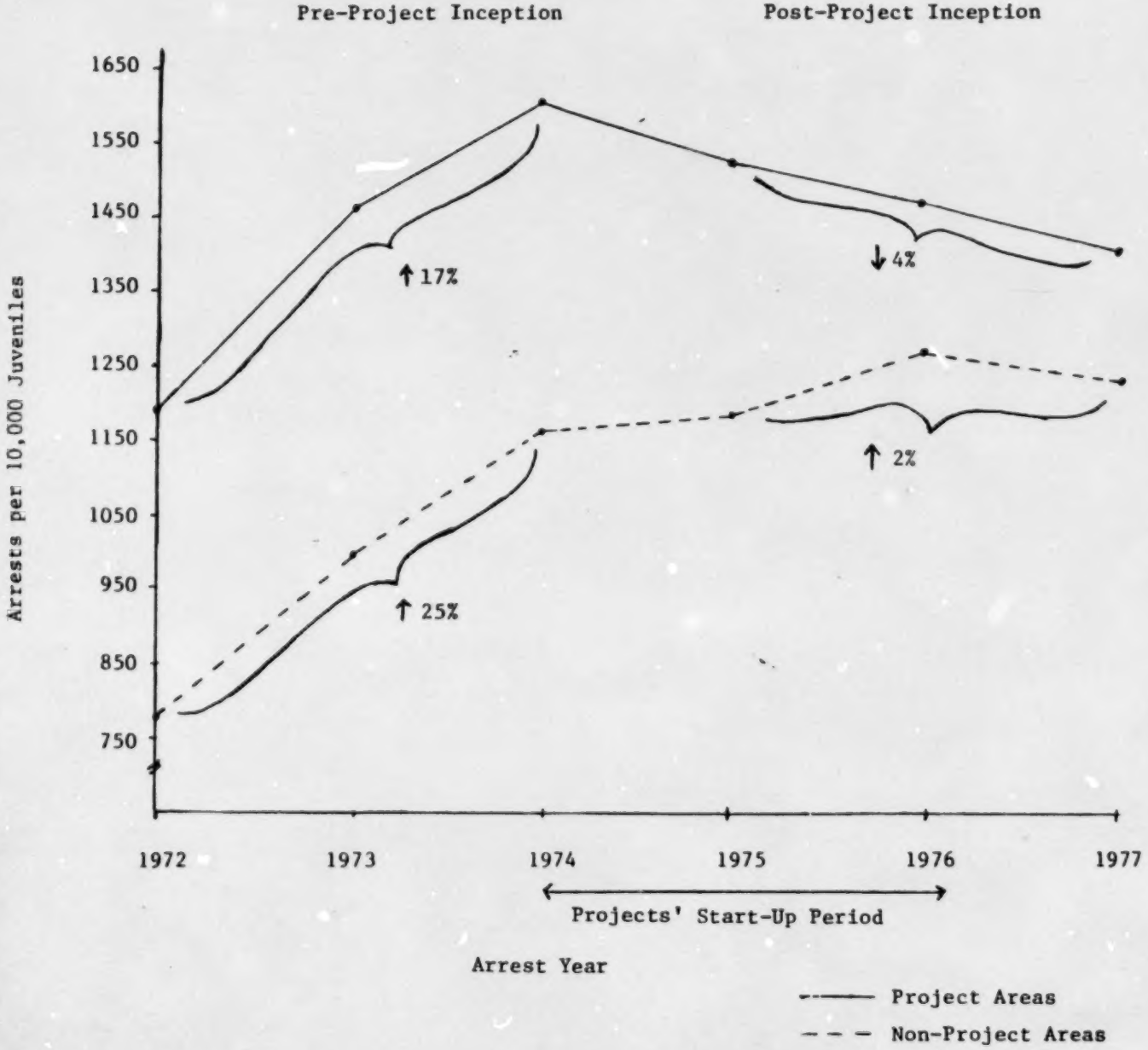
However, the results are not as clearcut as they first appear. There are two qualifications that should be made concerning the 1974-1975 period. First, there was a change in the arrest rate pattern in the non-project areas as well as in the project areas. Second, not all the diversion projects were geared up between 1974 and 1975, so one would not expect such a sharp drop in arrests as found here. For these two reasons, it appears that factors other than diversion may be operating during this period. And it is also important to keep in mind that because the projects started at different times, the cutoff point is fuzzy, and not a clean line.

Nonetheless, overall there is a trend of decreasing arrests in the project areas, while the non-project areas continue to show a slight increase, in the period after formal diversion programs began. The data thus are perfectly consistent with diversion impact. Other explanations for the arrest decrease still remain at this point, but we hope to make these less and less plausible as we continue analyses. We are now doing project-by-project assessments to see if the timing of project onset coincides with the arrest decreases, where noted. Also, the projects are being examined to determine if the more active programs show a corresponding greater decrease in arrests, as should be the case. Finally, similar analyses will be performed measuring the second objective, that of keeping juveniles out of the justice system.

In conclusion, results of this study as well as previous evaluations are consistent with the notion that diversion may be effective. While each piece of information may alone be insufficient, taking bits of evidence from a number of sources is bringing us closer to saying whether diversion does or does not work.

J. Johnston
Diversion Impact
4/6/79

Annual Juvenile Arrests per 10,000 Juveniles from 1972 through 1977: Juvenile Diversion Project Areas vs. Non-Project Areas (WIC 602 Offenses Only*)



*An offense committed under Section 602 of the Welfare & Institutions Code (WIC 602) is defined as any violation for which both juveniles and adults can be arrested, such as burglary or theft.